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ABSTRACT

A procedure for selecting peer tutors has been developed at the University of Texas at El Paso. Applicants who meet the required qualifications which include being of sophomore standing or above and maintaining at least a "B" average--are interviewed by staff members who examine applicants' grade transcripts and note a variety of factors related to their backgrounds and abilities. Faculty members who have taught the applicants are then asked their opinions of them. Next, the applicants are asked to consider a typical student tutoring problem and are videotaped in five-minute mock tutoring sessions in which they demonstrate their handling of the problem. Staff members view the tapes and determine the applicants' effectiveness in a number of areas, including knowledge of subject matter, clarity of expression, and teaching techniques; they then meet to compare their evaluations and to arrive at tentative hiring decisions. Finally, the prospective tutors take Cloze procedure tests devised from textbooks in current use as a check on their reading ability. This tutor selection process results in the selection of highly motivated and capable tutors. (GW)

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SELECTING EFFECTIVE PEER TUTORS

In any peer tutoring program there are four areas that need careful attention. These areas are (1) finding and hiring the best possible tutors, (2) training these tutors, (3) matching the tutors with students while continuing to train and supervise them, and (4) evaluating what has been accomplished. This paper will focus on the first of these areas. When, as a starting point, tutors are carefully selected, then fewer problems develop later in the other three areas. The procedure for selecting tutors described here was developed at the Study Skills and Tutorial Services of the University of Texas at El Paso, a program that regularly maintains a staff of 60-70 peer tutors.

Tutor selection begins early each year during the freshman orientation. New students are told about the tutoring program, invited to use it, and urged to apply for tutoring jobs if they have earned a B average or better by the time they are sophomores. Tutoring jobs are described as prestigious, for the intellectually-gifted, as useful for improving the tutor's grades,

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as challenging jobs which are in one's own field of study, which can be arranged around an existing class schedule, and which can be performed without leaving the campus.

Besides talking to freshmen, another preliminary step is used to help locate qualified tutors. Each spring we write to faculty members and ask for the names of outstanding students who might become good tutors. We write to these students, saying they have been recommended by their professors, and invite then to apply for jobs. We locate many good tutors this way, and the faculty feels more secure about the quality of the tutoring program when they have helped select the tutors.

Students who come to our office to apply for positions as a tutor are handed a list of qualifications for the job. These qualifications ask for at least sophomore standing, a minimum grade point average of 3.0, a high level of expertise in a particular discipline, an ability to communicate well with other students, willingness to take responsibility and work under supervision, and two strong recommendations from university faculty. Previous experience in tutoring or teaching is mentioned as desirable. Applicants who cannot meet these qualifications are never interviewed.

Applicants who believe that they meet these qualifications then complete a job application form that asks for the following information: date, name, social security number, address, telephone, age; undergraduate major, minor, classification, hours completed, date of graduation, G.P.A.; approximate hours taken in English, math, history, chemistry, biology, and other sci-

ences, political science, and sociology; bilingual ability; and teaching or tutoring experience. On this application students are also asked to write a paragraph which explains their vocational plans and to supply the names of two faculty members for recommendations. Students then bring their complete application along with a grade transcript to an interview.

The interviewer looks for several things while talking with the applicant. First, the transcript is examined to see what courses have been taken and what grades were received. The interviewer notes whether or not the student has taken heavy workloads while maintaining good grades, or whether the transcript is padded with easy courses. Attention is given to how well students have performed in all courses, both in and out of their major, and whether they have developed a broad educational background. The interviewer also looks to see if applicants have taken either or both of our study skills classes, Introduction to College Study and Quantitative Study Skills. Those who have taken these classes become effective tutors more quickly and easily than those who have not had them. Note is also made of whether or not the applicants regularly attend summer school. Students who take heavy loads year around are usually hard-working, aggressive students who make good tutors. The interviewer also looks to see if applicants have had experience in tutoring or teaching and have bilingual ability. About half of our tutors need to be bilingual because of our large bilingual student population. At some point in the interview the interviewer sits back and listens carefully to judge the applicant's clarity of

speech. Tutors must be easily understood. The written statement is then read and a judgement made about the quality of the applicant's writing ability. Tutors must be able to write well since they sometimes have to write reports to faculty. The applicant's manner and personality are also observed. Tutors should be pleasant, unabrasive people who will make students comfortable.

When the interview is concluded, if we have not already discussed the applicant with a faculty member, we do so now. We never hire a tutor without a strong recommendation from one or two faculty members.

At this point in our selection process we always have more applicants than jobs. Our next step is to determine who among them are the best teachers. Locating the best teachers is a two-step process. The applicants are first given 15-30 minutes to study a student problem like those our tutors handle in the tutoring rooms. They are then videotaped in a mock tutoring session with one of our staff members where they demonstrate how they would tutor the problem they have just studied. The problems we use are selected by our experienced tutors as typical and challenging to explain.

The three problems prospective math tutors study are fairly difficult ones from first and second semester calculus. Prospective chemistry tutors study several problems selected from the freshman chemistry course. Writing Room tutors examine a student paper that contains errors in grammer, spelling, punctuation, and organization. In the mock tutoring sessions that follow, one of our staff members plays the part of a student seeking help.

These sessions last five minutes. We videotape them so that several staff members can later view them, compare the different applicants, make notes on them, and select those who seem to possess the greatest amount of natural teaching ability.

When viewing the tapes, the staff is reminded that applicants are inexperienced, have received no training or suggestions for tutoring, and that they are often nervous. With these reservations in mind, the staff looks for answers to the following ten questions about each applicant:

1. Does the applicant know what he or she is talking about? Is there a clear and apparent understanding of the subject matter?

2. Is the applicant thorough in dealing with the problems? How much material is actually covered in five minutes?

3. Is the applicant easy to understand? Is technical vocabulary used accurately and effectively? Or, is an unnecessary amount of jargon used?

4. Does the applicant do all or almost all of the talking, or is the student forced to do some of it by answering the applicant's questions?

5. Does the applicant occasionally stop and really listen to the student, or is there an impatience to reassume control of the conversation?

6. Does the applicant make positive suggestions and comments to the student? Or, are the remarks made almost totally negative?

7. Does the applicant use the paper as a take-off point to teach general skills and principles that will be useful to the student later? Or, is the paper treated as an end in itself, a

stop-gap means to make the next grade a better one?

8. Does the applicant fall back regularly on memorized rules that make little or no sense to the student? Or, are complicated theories and rules explained in fresh and original ways so that the student can understand them?

9. Is the applicant patient with the student?

10. What kind of rapport does the applicant have with the student? Has the experience been sufficiently pleasant that the student would want to repeat it?

Taping these mock sessions and reviewing the tapes does not take a great deal of time if the procedure is systematized. We set aside parts of six or seven days just before school starts in the fall for these sessions. We schedule several in a single subject area for one day and tape several students each hour. While some are reading and thinking about the test material, others are being taped. We put all sessions for one day on a single tape, which also saves time.

A day or two later, the staff, in one sitting, views all applicants for one subject area. Each staff member writes comments on an evaluation sheet, noting each applicant's clarity, thoroughness, teaching techniques, patience, and other qualities. When all staff have viewed the tapes and written their comments, they then rank the applicants in order from strongest to weakest. They also draw a line through their list of names to indicate the breaking point between those who should be considered for jobs and those who should be rejected.

Now the staff compares notes. There is almost always general

agreement about the first and last ranked applicants. When there is disagreement about some of the names in the middle of the lists, the staff then reviews those applicants' tapes and finally arrives at some tentative decisions for hiring.

We do one final check before we hire our final slate of tutors, however. By this time we have checked all applicants' knowledge of their subject, their teaching techniques, their writing ability, and their speaking and listening ability. We now need to be sure that they can read the textbooks from which they will be tutoring. We devise cloze tests from textbooks that are in current use to check prospective tutors' reading ability. For example, the cloze we use for math tutors is a passage taken from a calculus textbook in which every sixth word is deleted for a total of 50 deletions. When we first devised this test, we administered it to the math tutors currently employed by the program. Their mean score of 78% was used as a standard for judging prospective math tutors' reading ability. These tests were scored by a mathematician on our staff who did accept synonyms so long as there was no violation of sense or grammer. Since we started using this test, we have hired only those applicants who have scored 70% or better on it.

The results of the cloze tests almost always serve to reassure us that we have selected the best of the available tutors. Those who receive the highest rankings on the mock tutoring sessions also, almost without exception, score highest on the cloze tests.

There are several advantages to taking the time and trouble described here to select peer tutors. The first advantage is to

the new tutors themselves who know they have had tough competition, have passed rigorous tests, and are now members of a select and special group. Their morale and confidence are good, they take their responsibilities seriously, and they can be counted on to do their new jobs well. Furthermore, they are likely to remain in their jobs for two or even three years, which improves the continuity and quality of the program. Careful tutor selection also improves the reputation of the tutoring program, particularly with the faculty and administration. When these people know that tutors are selected with care, they send their students to be tutored, and they have faith in the help their students receive.

There are two particular advantages to taping the mock tutoring sessions and keeping the tapes for awhile. When rejected applicants ask why they were not hired, they can be told that they did not do so well as others on the taped test. If they need proof, it is available. We have never had a rejected applicant ask to review a tape, however. Students seem to feel that this is a fair test, and they also seem to know when they have not performed well on it. The taped sessions are also useful to the new slate of tutors when they attend their first tutor training sessions. New tutors view their tapes and observe their strengths and weaknesses in tutoring techniques.